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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"

It's hard to believe, but the unofficial end of summer is only a week or so away. That's right, Labor Day is almost upon us! Where the heck did the summer go? With regard to the weather this summer, it's been terrific as far as I'm concerned. No heat waves, and maybe a total of three days when the temperature hit the 90's. Not many oppressive humid days, either. Okay, so I didn't get to use the pool that much because of the "cool" weather, but I can live with that. It was just an enjoyable season, for a change. And, I get to finish it off with a last vacation and hopefully see this weather pattern continue for awhile longer.

Another milestone was also reached this past week. My wife and I just celebrated our 20th anniversary. We're planning to celebrate while we're on vacation. Wow, twenty years.

So, let's get on with this week's issue. I'm starting to get into vacation mode, so that means that you won't have to read a lot of my ramblings this week!

Until next time...

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GFA Basic Tutorial Online

Matthias Arndt has announced:

I started a small tutorial project by providing a GFABASIC tutorial. It will teach how to use GFABASIC and its compiler, how to code in general, about loops, control flow, program structure and probably graphics.

It is work in progress. Expect it to grow. Additions will be chapter-wise and probably open for download later on.

http://home.tu-clausthal.de/~ifmar/gfabasic/,

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It’s been a fairly nice week so far here in New England. The temperatures have been low, as has the humidity. It’s been a nice little break from the oppressive moisture we’ve been experiencing. Of course, I have no doubt but that the higher temps and humidity will return before too long.

No, this isn’t going to be a discourse on global warming. It’s about keeping things in mind. I’ve noticed that we tend to forget what’s behind us even as we strain to see what’s ahead. <a mystic voice intones, "but never his mind on where he is".[grin]>

Even though it was only a week ago that we were dealing with oppressive humidity and heat, I’m sure that the next bout of it will take me just as much by surprise, and will leave me just as unprepared as it did last week. We seem to have a real problem with not only the here-and-now, but with learning from experience as well.

The frequency of messages in the NewsGroup seems to have picked up slightly, so we’ll have a little bit to talk about. See that? That’s been the way it goes for years now, and I’m still a little surprised when the weekly number of messages dips and then rises again.

Then again, it could be because I’m readying myself for that day when the numbers don’t increase anymore. It’ll be a sad day for me, even though it won’t be a sudden thing and the evidence for it will be visible for quite a while.

But that day is not today, friends and neighbors. It’s a beautiful, calm, clear night tonight, and all seems right with the world... or my little corner of it, at least. I’m content for the time being, despite the pain in my neck (yes, a literal pain in the neck).

Instead of droning on about this ’n that, how ’bout if I get to the news and STuff from the UseNet? I thought so. <grin>

From the comp.sys.atari NewsGroup
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John Blighe asks about reading a disk on different platforms:

"Is there any way that a zip disk written on an STe can be read on a PC or vice versa?"

Edward Baiz tells John:

"Yes, it should work as is. I have done it since I do own a STe and my wife uses a PC."

John replies:

"Nope, the STe disk isn't recognized on the PC prob because of the different format needed to be read on the Atari as defined by HDdriver 8."

Martin Byttebier adds:

"I don't know if this works on a STe - it surely works on Hades 060 and TT 030 - just partition the disk with the "TOS & Windows combined" option set to 'on'. This way you can use the zip on STe, pc and even on a Mac.

I've done this for many years now."

John tells Martin:

"I will give it a try, many thanks...

I tried it but, because I'm not using Magic or Mint, it doesn't work. Any other ideas would be gratefully received."

Martin replies:

"Hm... Maybe you can give BIGDOS a try. With BIGDOS single TOS will be able to read DOS partition >32 MB

Or you can make 3 partitions of 32 MB.

<URL:ftp://chapelie.rma.ac.be/atari/utilities/disktools/bigdos08.lzh> "

John gives it a shot and tells Martin:

"That worked fine and it reads the full 96mb partition too!"

Malcolm Dew-Jones asks about replacing his STacy's hard drive with a floppy:

"The hard disk from my STacy doesn't work (that's why it was given to me eh).

I have an original atari 720 K floppy in a 520 I don't plan on using anymore.

I want to take the floppy from the 520 and put it in place of the hard drive in the STacy.

Will this work? Will I be able to simply plug in the second floppy to some kind of existing connector? Or would I need some additional gizmo to allow the second floppy to plug in to the main board?

If anyone knows or has links to instructions for this then I would appreciate them, thanks."

’Simon’ tells Malcolm:

"No. You can not plug a floppy drive into a hard drive connector, it just won’t work and you risk causing damage to the floppy drive and maybe even the STacy.

Add a hard drive. It makes very little noise."

Malcolm explains to Simon:

"Well I realize that, thanks. The question was whether there is some other connector already in place that can take the second floppy - after all, one of the original configs of the STacy had two built in floppy drives - I thought perhaps all I would need is the right cable to do it. But it sounds like that is a ’no’.

: Add a hard drive. It makes very little noise.

Just like my DPS12 makes "very little noise"? I tolerate that cause I have to. I think I’ll just keep it the way it is for now, adding a hard disk won’t turn the atari into an up-to-date computer, but a single floppy still works fine for midi and for checking my mail and for writing in the middle of the night."

Alexander Beuscher adds this little tip:

"You know that hard disks can be ’shipped’? Most hard disk drivers have tools for this. It makes the disk spin down - and then it is absolutely silent. It will wake up with the next access. So you can boot up from hard disk, ship it and enjoy the silence."

Coda asks Malcolm:

"Are you sure about this [the second floppy]? If that is the case then you should be able to fit another. I have never seen stacy schematics but the way to add a second floppy on other ataris (bar falcon) is via the floppy port at the rear of the machine. You are going to have to open up the Stacy to do this, so why don’t you have a look at the floppy cable, if there is two connectors on it, and whether the middle connector is twisted. I guess that neither will be the case. You will probably have to get a PC floppy cable for both connectors. On the second floppy set the drive to DS1 (a PC floppy drive will be already set to DS1 as standard so try this first if you’ve got one to hand). If it doesn’t work, reverse the twist in the middle of the cable (drive B) to create a straight thru cable, then try again."

Ronald Hall posts:

"I was just hoping that someone has a URL to a site with clear details on the current state of affairs for accelerators for the Atari Falcon 030?

I was hoping to get a CT60 (drool!) but it appears that I’ve re-entered the Atari scene too late for that one..."

Greg Goodwin tells Ronald:

"There are, to the best of my knowledge, no current Falcon accelerators underway.

There is a project called the "Atari Coldfire Project" that hopes to create a TOS compatible computer. They have not yet succeeded.

There are also plans available to boost your Falcon to 25Mhz, allowing for 640x480 16 bit color and a 10-25% speed improvement.

Finally, there are continual improvements to Aranym, and I expect the day to soon come when you can take a Linux box and have for all practical purposes a high speed TOS computer. If a stock Falcon is not providing sufficient power, this is likely to be your best bet."

Mikael Ljungberg adds his opinion:

"Ahhh got SICK of hear about emulators, emulators and emulators. I use real Atari hardware, why use a emulator that only can play, barely, games ...

Throw the PC in the WC...

Use real Atari..."

Lonny Pursell replies:

"I don’t mind the use of emulators, but claiming the compatibility level of as hades or milan, sorry that is false. I personally have tested apps that run 100% fine on my hades, and I get strange results on the emu. Waste can, perhaps a bit harsh. I throw the emu in the virtual waste can."

Mark Duckworth asks for help in undeleting files:

"For some reason my backup script decided to instead delete everything on the system. Nice huh? After researching undelete tools I’m under the impression that I’m screwed because it doesn’t know the cluster sizes for each file that is deleted. Is this correct?

Is there any way I can get this stuff back?"

Alexander Beuscher tells Mark:

"These tools usually are good for recovering a single file or maybe a folder with files that has been deleted accidently.

If you have deleted the whole partition, then it’s really bad.

Things like start cluster and file size are not lost when you delete a file, it’s just the first character of it’s name replaced by a special "empty" character. The problem is the fragmentation of the partition. If the file is split up into many parts spread over the partition, then it’s getting hard to find all of them, as this information gets lost when a file is deleted.

You’re lucky if your partition is not fragmented, then you will find it in one piece.

Still you’re lucky if you have only one or few files deleted. You can check manually whether the freed data blocks on the partition belong to this or that file.

But if all the files have been deleted then it takes a very very big amount of work to reconstruct all the files. It is possible, but a very very hard job, especially if there are many non-text-files on the partition. These can hardly be related to different files.

By the way. all my words won’t help you if your backup script deletes not via GEMDOS routines but via writing blank sectors to your partition...

You have a functional backup, right? Perhaps there are tools that can improve recovery rate by knowing "old" versions of the files that got lost..."

Dr. Uwe Seimet, author of HD Driver, adds:

"The cluster size can be calculated from the boot sector parameters, which are still valid as long as you did not re-partition your drive.

Tools like DISKUS (German only) help with that,
http://www.seimet.de/diskus_english.html "

Well folks, that’s it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Battle of Football Giants!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" ’Thief’ Is A Steal! CGE 2K4 DVD!
From Buried to Treasure!
And more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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’NFL 2K5’ Edges Out ’Madden NFL’

The virtual football championship matchup this year pits "Madden NFL 2005" against "ESPN NFL 2K5" from Sega’s ESPN Videogames division. Both E-rated titles excel at delivering the National Football League experience to your living room through a combination of excellent controls, online gameplay and improved defensive features.

But there are some key differences.

Price is a big factor: "NFL 2K5" has rolled out a polished game for the bargain price of $20, while "Madden NFL 2005" goes for $50.

"NFL 2K5" has impeccable graphics, smooth controls and a deep franchise mode that matches Madden at every turn.

Players look and play like their real-life counterparts, and the top-notch presentation has been taken a step further this year with its exceptional use of the ESPN license.

A polygonal Chris Berman hosts halftime and postgame shows with video highlights on the Xbox and freeze-frame photos of key plays on the less-powerful PlayStation 2 and GameCube consoles.

ESPN’s Suzy Kolber conducts postgame interviews, and Trey Wingo and Mel Kiper Jr. lend their voices in weekly SportsCenter segments and the NFL draft. Only some inexplicably poor lip synching for Berman and Kolber keep the spots from having a perfect broadcast feel.

The new VIP system of "NFL 2K5" is the most innovative feature for any football game this season.

Your VIP profile tracks all football playing tendencies and stats, from your favorite "hot routes" to the kind of defense you like to use on third and long.

You can then load and play against your own VIP profile, practice against a friend’s profile, or download an opponent’s VIP profile from Microsoft’s Xbox Live online service to get a glimpse of their playing strategies. It’s the closest any game as come to mimicking human playing tendencies.

The ability to chain moves together, slide between blockers and carry tacklers for extra yards makes running on "NFL 2K5" realistic and enjoyable. Establishing a solid running game is important in the NFL and it should be here, too.

"NFK 2K5" gives you some extra control with context-sensitive tackling. Tapping the correct button on your controller can make your defender shove the ball carrier, while holding down the same button triggers a vicious wrap-up tackle.

On the other side of the virtual gridiron is "Madden NFL 2005" from Electronic Arts. While last year’s Madden game reinvented offensive play with playmaker controls, this year’s shifts the focus to the defensive side of the ball with great success.

Defensive playmaker controls let you alter the pre-snap assignments of every player on the field. You can shift entire units of linebackers, defensive backs and defensive lineman as before, but now you can also adjust individual player assignments using the right analog thumb stick.

There are endless combinations of easy-to-use adjustments and defensive "hot routes" that have an impact on every play and reward strategists.

The new "hit stick" is a risk-reward feature using the right thumb stick. Flick the thumb stick quickly toward a ball carrier to unleash a teeth-rattling tackle. Mistime it and your player will dive aimlessly into the turf. It takes time to master; but when done right, the tackles cause fumbles, dropped passes and injuries.

Unfortunately, Madden has upped its defense at the expense of key offensive elements, and establishing a realistic running game on the All-Pro and All-Madden levels is unrealistically hard.

Even the most talented running backs get caught on offensive lineman on inside runs and blocking artificial intelligence is poor on outside running plays.

Madden’s renowned "franchise mode" adds radio host Tony Bruno, who discusses league news, takes phone calls from listeners and interviews players and coaches. Local and national newspapers reporting weekly game stories, injuries and player milestones also feature prominently.

"Madden NFL 2005" brings a lot to the table and is available for a wider range of systems, including the PC, Xbox, GameCube, the PS2 and the original PS1, as well as the Game Boy Advance. "NFL 2K5" is available only for PS2 and Xbox.

Both games do a great job of recreating the thrill of professional football, but I’ll have to give the edge to "NFL 2K5" for its lower price and superior graphics and presentation.

"NFL 2K5": four stars out of four. "Madden NFL 2005": three and a half stars out of four.

For Stealth Lovers, ’Thief’ Is a Steal

One of the joys of the games in the "Thief" series is the ability to sneak up on opponents, quietly take them out with a good knock on the noggin, and then dump their body in the shadows so you can resume your hunt for loot.

But all too often, in the latest incarnation of this new adventure from Eidos and Ion Storm, my victims remained conscious whenever I whacked them with the blackjack. To add insult to their lack of injury, they usually mocked my abilities as an assailant, even as they used their swords to slice a few extra air holes in my sorry carcass.

Such are the indignities you risk if you play "Thief: Deadly Shadows." But it’s worth it.

Garrett, the master thief, is back in a game that doesn’t feel radically different from the previous "Thief" releases, but that’s a good thing. Games that reward stealth and patience have their own special quality, unnerving in a way that’s very different from the typical adventure, where firepower is everything.

You’ll learn to love the darkness. A glowing jewel at the bottom of the

screen shows your degree of visibility. If you run, walk on noisy material, or get too close to someone, you’re more likely to be detected. Crouching or hugging a wall makes you harder to see. There’s nothing like having your enemy pass just inches from you, oblivious to your presence.

Your weaponry is also designed to make you harder to detect. Water arrows douse torches from a distance. Noisemaker arrows can distract enemies if shot off in the distance. There are also flash bombs to temporarily blind your enemies if you get caught.

But it pays to master the blackjack, which helps you save ammunition that can get pretty scarce even if you play on the "easy" setting. But because I had trouble finding the cranial "sweet spot," I initially had to resort to conventional arrows to take out my enemies from a distance. It’s effective, but sloppy. And replacement arrows can be so expensive.

If you get far enough into the game, human opponents are supplemented by gargoyles and other inhuman creatures; it’s all the more reason to avoid a fight.

By the way, the maps in this game are hideously unhelpful. Those in the $15 strategy guide from Prima aren’t much better.

"Thief: Deadly Shadows" is rated for mature players because of the blood and violence. It’s available for $50 for Xbox and $40 for Windows.

Stealth is certainly not the theme of "Driv3r" (also known as "Driver 3"), which revolves around a ruthless - as in murderous - gang of car thieves trying to make a haul of 40 expensive cars to Istanbul.

The player assumes the role of Tanner, an FBI agent on loan to the Miami Police Department. He goes undercover, infiltrating the gang using his driving ability.

Make that his insane driving ability.

This gives players a license to fly around the streets, break virtually every traffic law, commandeer anything on wheels and, if they really want, drive vehicles off high places or into the ocean.

And to break things up, you’re also expected to spend a lot of time outside the car, running around shooting people.

Unfortunately, "Driv3r" is difficult to control, making it frustratingly difficult to master.

As a driving game, it’s just OK. For some reason, there’s no speedometer, except on one level that rips off the movie "Speed." All the cars have automatic transmissions, so there’s no need to shift gears. And you can’t turn a corner without having the tires squeal and the car poised to spin out of control. It may add to the drama, but I prefer games where you can actually demonstrate some driving skill by properly gauging your speed.

As a shooting game, it’s just as mediocre. There’s no auto-targeting, the crosshairs are too small and there’s no ability to see some of the enemies destined to aerate your anatomy.

Some of the design is just downright sloppy. The map in the opening level shows a highway coming to a dead end when it doesn’t. There were times when the distance gauge said I was at my destination, but clearly I wasn’t. When

I shot a bystander trying to swim away, he died on the water, not in it.

You could do a lot worse. But the developers could have done much better.

"Driv3r" from Atari is rated for mature players because of the violence. It's $50 for Xbox and PlayStation 2. A Windows version is set for release in November.

From Buried to Treasure

Movie-based video games, once left for dead, are thriving - and shaping the film industry.

'E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial" may rank as one of the most beloved movies of all time, but bring up Atari's video game version of the 1982 film to anyone old enough to remember when it was released and be prepared for an earful.

Because, while "E.T." the movie is a classic, E.T. the video game, released in late 1982, was classically bad. After unsuccessfully trying to cash in on the film's popularity, Atari hauled millions of unsold copies of the E.T. game out to the New Mexico desert and buried the cartridges, along with the reputation of movie-based games for almost an entire generation.

Only in the past few years have game developers begun creating quality games instead of what had been essentially poorly executed marketing gimmicks. Beginning in 1997 with the mega-selling "GoldenEye 007" for Nintendo 64, based on the James Bond film, and continuing through this summer with the releases of games based on "The Chronicles of Riddick," "Spider-Man 2" and "Shrek 2," virtual versions of blockbuster movies no longer resemble underwhelming commercial misfires.

"A few years ago, most of the games that came out were slapped together as sort of add-ons," says Philip O'Neil, president of Vivendi Universal Games' North American operations. "There was sort of an assumption that games that were based on films weren't going to be that good."

"A game like Spider-Man 2 wasn't slapped together in just a few months, whereas in the past it seemed as though many of the low-quality movie-based games that emerged were the direct result of last-minute deals," Greg Kasavin, executive editor of Gamespot.com, a San Francisco-based online magazine covering video games, said in an e-mail interview.

"The games were afterthoughts. Now they're not, because both Hollywood and the gaming industry realize that a strong movie brand can actually carry great leverage with game players. But at the same time, game players have leverage, too. If a movie game is terrible, it can actually hurt the movie franchise."

E.T. the game, for example, was designed in a less than two months, when quality games at the time took nine months to a year to develop. Now, many high-profile, film-based games can take more than two years to produce - longer than the movies from which they derive, and some with budgets in the tens of millions of dollars.

There are four major reasons why movie-based games have improved:

Blockbusters born

GoldenEye proved that a quality game attached to a movie can be a huge hit. The game, a first-person shooter that featured the digitized face of Pierce Brosnan as Bond, has sold more than 5 million units since its release seven years ago, making it tops among movie- based games, according to the NPD Group, a Port Washington-based research firm. There's a sequel planned for November.

"GoldenEye is an important case, since that game is legendary among game players, far more so, I'd say, than the movie is famous among movie buffs," says Kasavin, 27, who has played video games for about 20 years.

Since 1996, at least 10 other movie-inspired games have been blockbusters, selling between 1.1 million and 1.8 million copies, including three based on the "Star Wars" series and two based on James Bond, according to NPD Group figures.

Coordinated releases

Game companies began realizing the economic sense of releasing a video game alongside the corresponding movie. In 2002, Activision released the Spider-Man game a couple of weeks before the movie, a move previously unheard of; most video games had been released months, sometimes even years, after movies were in theaters. Moreover, the game, which featured the voices of actors Tobey Maguire and Willem Dafoe, was a hit among critics and has sold 1.8 million copies, according to the NPD Group.

Since then, such coordination of releases has become more the norm than the exception, if only so game companies can piggy-back on the marketing of the movie by the studios.

"As we looked at movie games, historically, that come out post-movie release, you see much less success than if the game is able to take advantage of the hype and buzz of the movie," says Kathy Vrabeck, president of Activision Publishing, whose Spider-Man 2 game has sold 1.3 million copies through July, a span of only about five weeks, according to the NPD Group. "If you're not out with the game at the exact same time, you miss out on all that momentum. It takes extra amounts of coordination and planning to make that happen."

Movie people got involved

Filmmakers and actors have become more involved with the games, most likely because technology has allowed games to become much more sophisticated. Director Peter Jackson allowed game designers from Electronic Arts to meet the production staff and see the sets of his "Lord of the Rings" movies, and two of the resulting games featured the voices of some of the stars, including Orlando Bloom, Ian McKellen, Viggo Mortensen and Elijah Wood, a video game fan.

"Actors who grew up with video games do see it as kind of a cool thing to have their voice in a video game," says Activision's Vrabeck, whose company used the voices and likenesses of Maguire, Kirsten Dunst and Alfred Molina for the Spider-Man 2 game.

Last year saw the release of Enter the Matrix, which was based on "The Matrix" series and reportedly cost as much as $20 million to make. Andy and Larry Wachowski, the brothers behind the film series, wrote and directed the game, which had an hour of additional movie footage from a plot that

ran parallel to "The Matrix Reloaded" movie and featured the likenesses and voices of actors Jada Pinkett Smith and Anthony Wong. The Wachowskis, both avid gamers, also are involved in The Matrix Online, a role-playing game due out later this year that will allow thousands of people to play simultaneously online in a "Matrix"-themed world.

Where the plots differ

Then there's The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay, with Vin Diesel starring. The game shares the same main character and title of June's "Chronicles of Riddick" movie but has a completely different plot. Not only has the Riddick game been a critical hit, but it has gotten better reviews than its corresponding movie - a rare distinction, much as when a movie is better than the book on which it's based. The game was developed by Tigon Studios, which was founded by Diesel, a video game fanatic.

"I love games," Diesel told the Chicago Tribune in June. "I think they're so credible now - they're so advanced. The video game market is emerging and acquiring some of the same characteristics of film. And that's fun."

Kasavin, the Gamespot editor, says that as those who grew up playing video games gain more prominence in Hollywood, movies and games should become more intertwined.

"I think we're in the midst of a generational transition, and the generation that's soon to be running the show as far as entertainment media is concerned recognizes gaming as an important medium," Kasavin says. "Movies like 'The Matrix' and 'Van Helsing' are not only being turned into video games, but I would argue that they're heavily influenced by them."

Cooperation with studios

There is more cooperation between film studios and game companies. There has to be. Though the $7 billion-a-year entertainment software industry has rivaled the box office in terms of sales, Hollywood has to convince its customers to buy just a $10 ticket, not a $50 video game. So game companies try to work with studios as much as possible in what often becomes "a huge, coordinated effort," says Activision's Vrabeck.

Sometimes it's a no-brainer: Vivendi Universal Games has a first-look agreement to produce games based on films distributed by sister company Universal Pictures, a relationship from which the "Riddick" game was born (both companies are owned by NBC Universal). That's important, because as the consumer and retail landscape for games becomes more competitive and development costs increase, companies need to proven brands, says Vivendi Universal Games' O'Neil, who says the company's Riddick game has sold about 150,000 copies, earning about $7.5 million.

"What we as video game publishers have discovered is that ultimately we have to be equal to or better than the movie," O'Neil says. "Our job is to create the most compelling game using aspects of the movie."

It makes even more sense when a popular film series translates to a popular game series. California-based Electronic Arts has worked with New Line Cinema to create three "Lord of the Rings" games, with two more due in November, and it has partnered with Warner Bros. to produce four games based on the Harry Potter movies and books.

"As movie and game companies get closer and closer together making entertainment, it makes a lot of sense for it to be tight cooperation,

because success becomes mutual there," says Mark Skaggs, executive producer of the upcoming PC game Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-Earth. "People can see the film and then turn around and play a version of the film at home as a video game. When it works right, it can be very successful."

Texas School to Offer Women's Gaming Scholarship

As part of a drive to attract more women into the male-dominated video game industry, a program for aspiring game developers at Southern Methodist University will offer a women-only scholarship, organizers said on Thursday.

The "Game Development Scholarship for Women" will help cover costs for women attending the Guildhall, an 18-month certificate program at SMU designed by noted game developers. Tuition for the six-term program is $37,000.

WomenGamers.com said it is working with the Guildhall and industry recruitment service Mary-Margaret.com to find donors to the fund.

According to the Entertainment Software Association, the games industry's trade group, 39 percent of game players are women, and women make around half of all game purchases.

The sponsors said further details would be announced at the Women's Game Conference in Austin next month.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Euro Jag Fest 2004

Hi folks !

Euro Jag Fest 2004 will take place on 23rd october 2004.

It's THE event for all Atari Jaguar/Lynx fans, developers and retailers of europe...

Many well known people already promised to attend and many new developments will be presented.

You won't want to miss it. Check out the official website: http://www.e-jagfest.de

Regards, Lars.

Classic Gaming Expo Announces Official DVD of CGE2K4

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Contact: Jayson Hill
Classic Gaming Expo
(334) 705-0848
media@cgexpo.com
Zach Meston
GameVideo Productions
(530) 347-7155
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CGE SERVICES CORPORATION ANNOUNCES THE Classic Gaming Expo 2004 COLLECTOR'S EDITION DVD Two-Disc Set To Be Packed With 3+ Hours of Footage

VALLEY STREAM, NEW YORK - August 25, 2004 - Disappointed that you missed Classic Gaming Expo 2004? Perhaps you went and had such a great time that you'd like to relive it all again? Whichever the case, now you can experience all of the excitement of CGE 2004 at home. The organizers of Classic Gaming Expo have announced the upcoming release of the Classic Gaming Expo 2004 Collector's Edition DVD, the first and only official video document of the video game industry's largest show dedicated to the preservation and celebration of video game history.

The two-disc set, to be produced and distributed by GameVideo Productions, will offer more than three hours of exclusive content, including highlights of every keynote speech, biographies of all the gaming "alumni" in attendance, interviews with exhibitors and attendees, an excerpt from the critically acclaimed documentary Once Upon Atari, an interactive tour of Classic Gaming Expo's world-renowned museum, and additional DVD-ROM content.

"I'm thrilled to be producing CGE2K4 Collector's Edition DVD," said Zach Meston, president of GameVideo Productions, and a 15-year veteran of the videogame industry. "Gaming networks and web sites offer brief and unsatisfying glimpses of Classic Gaming Expo, but the Collector's Edition DVD will capture everything that makes CGE so great. It's a perfect memento for CGE attendees, and a perfect gift for gamers who couldn't make the pilgrimage to San Jose."

"Even the most fanatic of classic game fans can't attend Classic Gaming Expo every year," adds Joe Santulli, Classic Gaming Expo co-organizer. "I'm truly excited that Zach has taken on this project, because it ensures that the magic of the show will be captured on DVD."

CGE2K4 Collector's Edition DVD ships in mid-September with an MSRP of $24.99 and is available via Classic Gaming Expo's website at http://www.cgexpo.com/dvd.htm.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Justice Dept. Cracks Down On Internet Crime

The FBI seized computers, software and equipment as part of an investigation into illegal sharing of copyrighted movies, music and games over an Internet "peer-to-peer" network, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced Wednesday.

Search warrants were executed at residences and an Internet service provider in Texas, New York and Wisconsin as part of the first federal criminal copyright action taken against a P2P network, in which users can access files directly from computers of others in the network.

The warrants sought evidence about the operators of five "hubs" of the "Underground Network," an organization of about 7,000 users who, prosecutors charge, repeatedly violate federal copyright laws by swapping feature films, music, software and computer games.

"The message is simply this: P2P or peer-to-peer does not stand for ’permission to pilfer,’" Ashcroft told reporters at a Justice Department news conference.

Unlike file-sharing networks popular with tens of millions of Internet users worldwide, the smaller network targeted by the Justice Department was managed by centralized "hub" computers that restricted participation. Technical experts said it operated similarly to the former Napster service, which the entertainment industry shut down in July 2000.

Industry groups say Internet piracy of intellectual property is a huge and growing problem. Ashcroft estimated $19 billion is the total cost to creative artists, management firms, distribution companies, theaters, and all the employees connected with them.

Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, said the Justice Department initiative, dubbed "Operation Digital Gridlock," should "puncture the myth that illegal activity on the Internet is safe because it is not traceable."

Charges and arrests are likely to follow after the evidence is examined, investigators said. The maximum penalty for criminal copyright infringement is a fine of $250,000 and five years in prison.

The search warrants were executed at homes in San Antonio and Belleaire, Texas; Johnson City and Fulton, N.Y.; and Waukesha, Wis. Another search was conducted at the office of The Planet, a Dallas-based Internet service provider. Authorities said The Planet is not a target of the probe.

The individuals involved in the search warrants operate some of the Underground Network’s hubs, which act as a central point for people granted membership to exchange copyrighted files. Ashcroft said the hubs can store digital data each day equivalent to 60,000 full-length movies or 10 million songs.

The five hubs are called Movieroom, Project X/The Asylum, Achenon’s Alley, Digital Underground and Silent Echoes, according to an FBI affidavit filed in support of one search warrant.

Agents used covert computers to infiltrate the network and obtain for free huge amounts of copyrighted material, including such movies as "Kill Bill Vol. I," "The Last Samurai" and "Bruce Almighty." The agents downloaded music by artists ranging from Bruce Springsteen to Barry White as well as popular games and software.

In a related development, the Recording Industry Association of America continued its legal campaign to halt illegal downloading of music by filing another 744 copyright infringement lawsuits Wednesday against individuals using such P2P networks as eDonkey, Kazaa, Limewire and Grokster.

"There will always be a degree of piracy, both on the street and online," said RIAA President Cary Sherman. "But without a strong measure of deterrence, piracy will overwhelm and choke the creation and distribution of music."

The Justice Department also is preparing to announce the results of a nationwide campaign against the purveyors of e-mail "spam" that involves more than 100 arrests, search warrants, subpoenas and other law enforcement actions, said industry and law enforcement officials.

Many cases in "Operation Slam Spam" involve "phishing," which are e-mails that appear to be from financial institutions and other legitimate businesses but are actually fraudulent. They are used to induce people to provide credit card numbers and other personal information.

Other cases in the crackdown involve pornography and use of spam, or unsolicited e-mails, to infect computers with viruses that can obtain personal data or be used by a hacker to further spread the virus.

Congress last year passed a law making fraudulent and deceptive e-mail practices a crime punishable by up to five years in prison. Industry groups say spam e-mail accounts for almost three-quarters of the e-mail in the United States and costs consumers and businesses as much as $10 billion a year.

Some Twists in Music Piracy Lawsuits

A woman in Milwaukee and her ex-boyfriend are under orders to pay thousands to the recording industry. A man in California refinanced his home to pay an $11,000 settlement. A year after it began, the industry’s legal campaign against Internet music piracy is inching through the federal courts, producing some unexpected twists.

"I’m giving up and can’t fight this," said Ross Plank, 36, of Playa Del Ray, Calif. He had professed his innocence but surrendered after lawyers found on his computer traces of hundreds of songs that had been deleted one day after he was sued.

Plank, recently married, refinanced his home for the money.

"Apparently, they would be able to garnishee my earnings for the rest of my life," Plank said. "For the amount I’m settling, this made sense. I

didn’t see any other way. They’ve got all the power in the world."

The campaign has also produced worries, even from one federal judge, that wealthy record companies could trample some of the 3,935 people across the country who have been sued since the first such cases were filed in September 2003.

"I’ve never had a situation like this before, where there are powerful plaintiffs and powerful lawyers on one side and then a whole slew of ordinary folks on the other side," said U.S. District Judge Nancy Gertner at a hearing in Boston. Dozens of such lawsuits have been filed in her court.

On the West Coast, another judge rejected an injunction sought by record companies against one Internet user, saying it would violate her rights.

So far, however, record companies are largely winning their cases, according to a review by The Associated Press of hundreds of lawsuits. They did lose a major ruling this week when a U.S. appeals court in California said manufacturers of software that can be used to download music illegally aren’t liable, leaving record labels to pursue lawsuits against Internet users.

James McDonough of Hingham, Mass., said being sued was "very vexing, very frustrating and quite frankly very intimidating." He told Gertner, the Boston judge, that his 14-year-old twins might be responsible for the "heinous crime" of downloading music "in the privacy in our family room with their friends."

Gertner has a teenage daughter and said she was familiar with software for downloading music. She blocked movement on all the Massachusetts cases for months, "to make sure that no one, frankly, is being ground up."

Gertner started ruling on cases again this month, when she threw out counterclaims accusing record companies of trespass and privacy invasions for searching the online music collections of Internet users.

At least 807 Internet users have already settled their cases by paying roughly $3,000 each in fines and promising to delete their illegal song collections, according to the Recording Industry Association of America, the trade group for the largest labels.

Experts said the amounts of those settlements ? compared to $7,500 or more for losing in court ? discourage people from mounting a defense that could resolve important questions about copyrights and the industry’s methods for tracing illegal downloads.

"When you’re being sued for a relatively small amount of money, it doesn’t make sense to hire the specialized entertainment or copyright counsel," Gertner said at a hearing this summer.

In Milwaukee, Suheidy Roman, 25, said she couldn’t afford a lawyer when her ex-boyfriend, Gary Kilps, told record companies that both of them had downloaded music on Roman’s computer. Although she denies the accusation, Roman ignored legal papers sent to her home. A U.S. judge earlier this year granted a default judgment against her and Kilps, ordering each to pay more than $4,500.

Industry lawyers said they have won an estimated 60 such default judgments nationwide.

"I've got brothers and sisters and family who come here and use my computer all the time," Roman told the AP. "But as far as downloading or distributing music, I don't do that. ... I don't have any money for an attorney, let alone for any judgment against me." She said she is unemployed with two small children.

Roman said that since she was sued, she hasn't talked to Kilps. He doesn't have a telephone listing and didn't return calls from AP to his relatives.

Lawyers said they traced to Roman and Kilps an Internet account distributing songs by UB40, Tu Pac, Destiny's Child and Air Supply. They said the illicit music collection also was associated with an account under the name "Flaka," which Roman acknowledges is her nickname. She told AP she deleted all the files on her computer, not just any songs.

In a few courthouses, the music industry has stumbled even in victory. A judge in California rejected an injunction banning Lisa Dickerson of Santa Ana, Calif., from illegally distributing music online. Although the judge agreed Dickerson was guilty, he said there was no evidence she was still breaking the law and determined that such a ban on future behavior would violate her rights. She was ordered to pay record companies $6,200 in penalties and court costs.

Still, the California consultant who recently agreed to pay the largest settlement in any of the lawsuits, $11,000, urged Internet users not to take solace in rare procedural victories.

"It scares me," Plank said. "For anyone fighting any of these lawsuits - unless they have nothing to lose - the only thing to do is settle. You have no power against these people."

Download.Ject - The Worm that Didn't Have To Be

The Download.Ject Trojan has returned to the Internet, threatening Windows users who have not installed patches from Microsoft. This new version of the worm travels through instant-messaging networks, such as AIM.

The security firm PivX warned users Friday morning of the threat. PC owners who have not downloaded and installed Microsoft patch MS04-25 are vulnerable. The new Windows XP Service Pack 2 also contains a security patch that resolves the current Download.Ject threat, which takes advantage of a weakness in the Explorer browser.

The authors of the worm try to capture users in two steps. First, a worm spreads through ICQ or AIM and delivers a message to prospective victims, enticing them to visit certain Web sites. This initial stage has not been identified as the infection - it is just an advertisement, of sorts.

Those using the browser who attempt to access the site - in the U.S. as well as Russia - find their home page has been changed to a Web site called "TargetSearch," and some pages of porn pop up when Internet Explorer is opened. The virus infects Explorer using Object Data, Ibiza CHM and MHTML Redirect.

"It's already a solved problem," said PivX security expert Thor Larholm,

referring to security-vendor efforts. "If you want Microsoft to secure these threats, then we're going to see such attacks on an ongoing basis," he told NewsFactor.

"If you want the security vendors to secure IE, that has already happened," he said. Larholm says PivX published extensive research about Internet Explorer last year and made public its findings and recommendations.

Other security analysts say threats to IE probably are not over, despite the introduction of Service Pack 2. "We've seen more than 160 patches for IE since version six was released," said Chris Kraft of the security firm Sophos. "To say a service pack will solve everything is always premature," he told NewsFactor.

Users demand features that result in applications inherently vulnerable to hackers, Kraft says. "The only perfect system," he added, "is a featureless one." IE is certainly one type of software that will remain exposed, by definition.

The problems with Explorer are not solely Microsoft's fault - though the ongoing identification of vulnerabilities in Windows and its ancillary programs certainly hurts the company's image. Equally culpable are the users who receive an instant message and click on the invitation for an infection.

Somewhere in Redmond, Washington, a Microsoft security manager is throwing up his or her hands, wishing that PC owners could become educated enough not to take candy from strangers.

"Fighting viruses is going to take effort from everyone," Kraft acknowledged.

New Virus Makes Spyware Sleazier

It was creepy enough when virus writers designed worms able to steal our financial data and password information off our PCs. Now, in a new twist on the standard Trojan, virus writers have managed to make spyware even seedier.

The W32/Rhot-GR worm is able to hijack webcams and microphones to spy on users in their home or workplace, according to Sophos security consulting firm. It spreads via network shares, exploiting a number of Microsoft security vulnerabilities, and installs a backdoor Trojan as it travels. Besides spying on users via the webcam, it also is able to steal personal data.

In theory, this is a very worrisome development. "In the workplace, this worm opens up the possibilities of industrial espionage. At home, it is equivalent to a Peeping Tom who invades your privacy by peering through your curtains," said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Sophos. "If your computer is infected, and you have a webcam plugged in, then everything you do in front of the computer can be seen - and everything you say can be recorded."

With many home users keeping poorly defended PCs in their bedrooms, there is considerable potential for abuse, Cluley observes. However, the worm is not able to manipulate images - it can only capture them as they stream.

The good news, Panda Software CTO Patrick Hinojosa told NewsFactor, is that there have not been any occurrences of this virus in the wild - yet. "If it is out there, it is not spreading very fast," he says. Also, it is not a virus that is likely to get past the high-end computer security systems that many companies now have installed.

Another factor that would limit the worm's spread is the issue of bandwidth. "I don't believe this will be a very effective worm even if it does get out there, because you are talking about a huge amount of bandwidth to support all these webcams."

"It's a creepier development than anything else," Hinojosa says.

The Fog of Spam War

In Greece they may be celebrating the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, but online spammers are gearing up for the spamming equivalent of the Olympics. Antispam firm Vircom reports a fiftyfold increase in Olympics-related spam between January and July. Typically hawked via spam are tickets, souvenirs, and online betting. You may want to add olympics to your spam filter blacklist.

After nearly a year of lawsuits against bulk e-mailers, improvements in antispam technology, and passage of the Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing law (CAN-SPAM), spam fighters face an unenviable choice: They can concede their new weapons are not as effective as they'd hoped, or they can claim progress despite some failures.

Spam volumes are on the rise, say several recent surveys. In early August, the nonprofit group Consumers Union reported that in a survey of 2000 e-mail users, 47 percent said spam had increased since the federal antispam law took effect in January. Sixty-nine percent said at least half the e-mail they receive is spam. This corresponds to a Commtouch Software study, which reports a 42 percent increase in the first half of 2004.

Judging from reader feedback and my own experience, these studies seem right on the money.

But here's a weird thing: No matter how heavy the spam gets for us e-mail users, the news is always good from leading spam-fighting e-mail providers like America Online, EarthLink, and Microsoft.

Microsoft recently told me that Hotmail users have seen a 60 percent decrease in spam volumes. AOL says spam's entry to AOL in-boxes has dropped "noticeably." And EarthLink says customers who use its optional free spam-blocking feature can "eliminate virtually 100 percent of all junk e-mail."

Do these well-intentioned slayers of spam live in the same universe as the rest of us?

But wait - the news is even better from companies that block spam from corporate networks. Antispam company Postini says companies that use its advanced spam filters "experience a 90 to 99 percent reduction in spam." I guess Consumers Union didn't survey any Postini customers. Apparently

Brightmail customers, who enjoy a "95 percent effectiveness rate," aren't well represented in the survey results either.

The story is the same with desktop software. Allume (formerly Aladdin Systems) says its SpamCatcher "blocks 99 percent of unwanted e-mail" and Cloudmark claims its SpamNet provides a 98 percent drop in spam.

Taking those claims at face value, one might conclude the war against spam has already been won. Hardly.

Vendors tout success in the spam wars not simply to win new customers. My guess is that the folks who work for companies like Microsoft, which filed 60 spam-related lawsuits over the past two years, need to feel they are making a difference.

Don't get me wrong: We should be enormously grateful to these companies for spending millions of dollars to combat spam. Anybody with an in-box should applaud EarthLink for taking down the Buffalo Spammer. AOL also fights spammers in court.

But keep in mind that ISPs don't fight spam simply because it's a nuisance to you and me. Spam costs ISPs millions of dollars each year. The unwanted, excess e-mail hits them with the costs of data storage and of bandwidth to send and receive messages, plus their investments in spam-filtering technologies. It's also expensive for an ISP to lose any customer who is flooded with spam and thinks a new ISP might fight spam more effectively.

Clearly spam is a scourge to individuals, ISPs, and big businesses. Ferris Research forecasts U.S. companies will spend $10 billion this year to fight spam. The figure includes lost productivity plus the cost of spam-fighting hardware and software, and the technical staff needed for combat.

Even the e-mail providers' impressive-sounding spam-blocking statistics reveal a failure: A 95 percent filter accuracy rate, for example, still lets through 5 out of every 100 spam messages. The sad reality is some of us are getting hundreds of unsolicited messages each day; even filtered, that means upwards of 35 spam messages a week.

The only filter that is 100 percent accurate is a challenge/response system. This type of filter is permission-based, which means messages are blocked if they come from anyone who isn't on your whitelist. But there's more to a challenge/response system.

A simple whitelist system works fine if you're expecting e-mail only from your friends, whom you can put on your list in advance. But blocking every unknown sender isn't practical. That's where challenge/response comes in. When someone not on your whitelist sends you an e-mail, the filter responds with a message directing the correspondent to perform some action, such as clicking a link. If the sender responds correctly to the challenge, the e-mail address is added to your whitelist, and subsequent messages get through. The idea is that bulk e-mailers can't perform such individual tasks, and so their e-mail remains blocked from your in-box.

The real story isn't that consumers are complaining about receiving more spam at the same time antispam firms are touting spam-free in-boxes. Rather, my hunch is a lot of people are like my brother: He gripes about spam, but he can't be bothered with using a spam filter.

Astonishingly, 46 percent of e-mail users do not use any spam filter, according to a 2003 study by Forrester Research. The same study reveals

that 44 percent rely only on the spam filter their ISP provides. Only 5 percent use both their ISP's filter in combination with desktop spam-filtering software.

Today, with spam harboring viruses, distributing phishing lures, and spreading Trojan horses, spam filters are as essential to computing as virus protection and firewalls. A good spam filter - on the desktop as well as on the e-mail server - is essential, no matter how successful your ISP says it is when it comes to fighting spam.

Home Users Most Vulnerable to SP2 Flaw

One of the first flaws found in Windows XP SP2 - which leaves a PC vulnerable through a drag-and-drop hole in Internet Explorer - could be used by hackers for even greater mischief.

After thinking through the ramifications of this hole, security analysts believe hackers also would be able to enter the security center of the service pack - which monitors the health of the firewall and antivirus software and alerts users to any breaches - and take control of the administrator rights.

This means a virus writer could circumvent the security controls in the center, so that when logging on subsequent to a takeover, the user would receive the standard "all is okay" message, Patrick Hinojosa, CTO of Panda Software, told NewsFactor.

Home users would be the most affected, he says. "Home users tend to install the default administrator access and do not change the setting to create a new log-on for themselves. So, if a virus writer were to send a message to the machine to run a script, it would be able to change those notifications, because Microsoft, unfortunately, did not restrict the named applications to known security firms."

In this version of XP, he says, anyone can run a script with administrator rights to change what the security center says.

Microsoft's argument is that this flaw would be the least of a PC user's worries, given that if a piece of malware were able to access the security settings, it hardly would stop with changing the security center's message.

To a certain extent, that is true, Hinojosa says. "If someone wants to make an immediate attack, he probably won't even bother with the security center's settings.

"However, there is that scenario in which a hacker would plant malware to go off at a certain point down the road. In the meanwhile, the user must not be able to detect it," he pointed out.

In upcoming releases, Hinojosa says, Microsoft is expected to change that

particular setting so only antivirus firms and firewall providers will be able to have the write ability to give data as to whether the antivirus software is working or the firewall is still up.

Microsoft Commits to 2006 Target for Next Windows

The next version of the Windows operating system, Microsoft Corp.’s flagship product, will ship in 2006, the world’s largest software maker said on Friday.

That’s the first time that Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft has committed to a launch target for the ambitious upgrade to Windows, code-named Longhorn.

Bill Gates, Microsoft’s chairman and chief software architect, is leading the effort to ship the next major upgrade to Windows, which promises to boost the performance of the world’s most widely used operating system.

"Getting ’Longhorn’ to customers in 2006 will provide important advances in performance, security and reliability, and will help accelerate the creation of exciting new applications by developers across the industry," Gates said in a statement.

In order to get Longhorn shipped on time, however, Microsoft said it had sacrificed a key component of the system that was to be shipped at the same time, the underlying file system for the software, called WinFS.

The new file system, based on database software architecture aimed at making it easier for users to find information stored on hard drives, will be shipped later, with a test, or beta version, of WinFS shipping along with Longhorn in 2006.

"We’ve had to make some trade-offs to deliver the features corporate customers, consumers and OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) are asking for in a reasonable time frame," said Microsoft group vice president Jim Allchin.

As part of the overall plan, Microsoft said it will make some of its programming tools available to software developers early so that they can build applications that will work with Windows XP, the current version of Windows, and Longhorn.

Analysts had been warning that Microsoft’s plans for Longhorn were too ambitious and that they company would have to scale back plans if it didn’t want to wait until 2007 to ship Longhorn. Industry experts had long expected Microsoft to set a 2006 target date for Longhorn’s debut.

Microsoft did not provide specifications for the type of computer hardware, such as memory, processor and storage, needed to run Longhorn.

Microsoft’s last major desktop software release was Windows XP in October 2001, followed by the launch of Windows Server in 2003.

The Longhorn Server software for networked computers that handle data storage, file management and Web traffic, is slated for release in 2007.

Search-Engine Loyalty Remains Strong

The battle for supremacy in the online-portal and search-engine space must be having some effect: Americans' satisfaction with services in these areas is rising, according to the annual e-business update of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which is produced by the University of Michigan School of Business.

The problem for the online-news sites is that they have failed to establish relationships with readers or develop the personalities of their print and TV counterparts, Freed said. "Another factor is that oftentimes people wind up at a news site through another portal, so the customer relationship is with the portal provider, not the news service."

In this survey, search remains the clear standard setter among the three e-business sub-categories measured, with an aggregate score of 80 on the 100-point ACSI scale. Portals (71) and news/information sites (75) lag well behind.

Not surprisingly, Google continues to lead in the search-engine category, with a strong score of 82, despite its ongoing brand and product evolution and despite competitors' moves to match its services. Its closet competitor is Yahoo, at 78, followed by MSN at 75.

Ask Jeeves, meanwhile, increased its score by a significant 14.5 percent in the past three years, to 71.

It may not be long, though, before the search landscape changes even more dramatically. For starters, the lines between search engines and portals are blurring, with even retailers getting into the mix, according to Larry Freed, CEO of ForeSee Results, which participated in administering the study.

"Soon," he told NewsFactor, "we will begin to see real competition between Google and other online names, such as Amazon.com. It is starting already, with the development of Froogle, Google's shopping site, and A9, Amazon's search

project." While A9 currently focuses search within its own book site, Freed said it is planning to build further reaching capabilities. "It will be a general search engine but will add a retail component to it to tie in revenues," he said.

Leaving aside the changing players, what is remarkable about the search-engine category is the high loyalty it receives from users - 15 percent higher than for portals or news and information sites. News and information sites' loyalty levels, by contrast, suggest a below-average ability to deliver a satisfying experience to customers.

For starters, scores in this category have changed little during the three years in which they have been measured. This year, the category scored 75 - up a point from last year - and the sites included ended up roughly equal, with ABC, CNN and MSNBC all earning 74; and NYTimes and USA Today tied at 72.

The problem for the online-news sites is that they have failed to establish relationships with readers or develop the personalities of their print and TV counterparts, Freed said. "Another factor is that oftentimes people wind

up at a news site through another portal, so the customer relationship is with the portal provider, not the news service."

The survey also found that AOL is back from the dead, thanks to its partnership strategy to drive content.

AOL’s score has risen to 67, from "a dismal" 56 five years ago. However, it is still significantly behind its rivals, including category leader Yahoo, the survey notes.

Web Site Helps Compare Gasoline Prices

Hate it when you fill ’er up and, five minutes later, spot another station selling gas for a nickel a gallon cheaper?

Jason Toews, a 30-year-old computer programmer from the Minneapolis suburbs, hated it even more when he couldn’t find an easy way to shop around.

"I even tried calling up some of the stations to find out what their prices are and they usually didn’t like to tell you over the phone," he said. "They think it’s one of their competitors."

Toews started the nonprofit GasBuddy Organization Inc. four years ago with a friend, chronicling regular unleaded prices in the Twin Cities. The site was so successful that he and co-founder Dustin Coupal, an ophthalmologist, expanded nationwide.

Now, the gasbuddy.com portal links to 173 price comparison Web sites with names like phillygasprices.com, wichitagasprices.com and miamigasprices.com, with 50 more local sites coming online this fall.

Price-sensitive motorists are flocking to the Internet to shave their gas bills - and, perhaps equally important, for the psychological satisfaction of knowing they have some control over what they pay.

"I’m cheap. I’m not paying more for something than I have to," said Christina Klein, 40, who uses the Philadelphia site daily and doesn’t mind driving a little out of her way if it means saving a few pennies per gallon.

The GasBuddy network surveys an average of 150,000 stations per week in all the U.S. states and Canada. At phillygasprices.com, volunteers check hundreds of Philadelphia-area gas stations per week and post their findings on the Web; prices are automatically sorted from lowest to highest.

When gas shot up to more than $2 a gallon earlier this summer, traffic to the GasBuddy sites increased sevenfold, to about 500,000 unique visitors a day, Toews said. It has since dropped to 150,000 to 200,000 a day - although that could spike again if gas prices rise, as many analysts expect.

Another Internet site, for-profit GasPriceWatch.com, also reported an increase in traffic, with a peak of 300,000 visitors on June 6.

"Our participation is directly proportional to the price of gasoline," said Brad Proctor, founder of GasPriceWatch.com.

The Web sites work similarly, relying on volunteers to report prices and advertisers to either pay the bills or turn a profit. Visitors enter their zip codes to find prices at nearby stations.

About 270,000 people have registered as volunteer gas price reporters for GasBuddy. Some people post prices once or twice a month, while others are fanatical about the site, reporting every day, Toews said.

Centerville, Ohio-based GasPriceWatch.com said it has more than 100,000 price spotters.

Gas prices are influenced by a complex array of factors, including supply and demand, the price of crude oil, refinery costs, taxes, and competition among gas station owners, so it's unlikely that the Web sites have much of an effect on pricing. In Pennsylvania alone, hundreds of thousands of motorists pump more than 10 million gallons of gas into their cars, trucks and SUVs each day, dwarfing the relatively small number of people who frequent the pricing sites.

Holly Tuminello, vice president of the Petroleum Marketers Association of America, a trade group of 8,000 independent gas stations, said she doubted that gas station owners relied on the Internet to check competitors' prices and set their own accordingly. The price of gas changes so frequently that price reports more than 24 hours old are likely outdated, she said.

But Tuminello said the sites still perform a valuable service - and she doesn't blame motorists for using them. "Good for them. These prices are high and everybody loves a bargain," she said.

Cindy Reimel, 43, a corporate accountant who occasionally reports prices for phillygasprices.com, figures she and her husband save nearly $10 a month by using the Internet to shop for gas, out of a total monthly bill of $200 to $300.

"I need to fill up once every five days and I have a minivan that takes a lot of gas," said Reimel, who drives 20 miles to work. "I'll take a different route if the gas is cheaper."

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